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ABSTRACT

Although attrition is repeatedly described as the number one problem in adult basic education (ABE), the raw numbers of attrition rates do not tell the whole story. Studies show noncompleters in both ABE and higher education sometimes leave when they feel their goals have been realized. Counting adults who "stop out" as dropouts is also misleading. Retention is linked to a number of factors: a gap between learner expectations and reality; past school and home experiences; educational and practical concerns; and social integration. Adults now make up at least 50 percent of higher education enrollments. Perhaps attrition has increased because more learners are now at varying stages of the life cycle compared to the traditional 18- to 22-year-old cohort. Social integration has a significant positive effect on retention, although social integration for adults may be better defined as how one integrates pursuit of education into one's overall life. As in ABE, noncompletion is the most successful outcome for some nontraditional college students. For adult learners in both ABE and higher education, early detection of those at risk of withdrawing and follow-up of those who have withdrawn are effective practices to help adults persist. Strategies for ABE include material challenging to adults, opportunities to succeed at something in every class meeting, and alternative arenas for success. Strategies for higher education include preenrollment counseling, personal attention, and flexible, convenient scheduling. (Contains 17 references.) (YLB)

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Adult Learner Retention Revisited
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NO. 166

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Adult Learner Retention Revisited

by Sandra Kerka

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Adult learner retention continues to hold the attention of adult educators in every type of program. Although the reasons students leave and the strategies for keeping them may differ from adult basic education (ABE) to higher education, the goal of retention is the same: to keep learners in programs until they achieve their goals (Tracy-Mumford et al. 1994). In any program, adults are largely voluntary participants, but the student role is just one of many roles and responsibilities competing for their time and attention. In fact, personal reasons such as family problems, lack of child care, and job demands are often cited as the cause of withdrawal. At the same time, adults usually have pragmatic, focused reasons for participating and will leave whenever they feel their goals have been met or if they feel the program will not satisfy their goals. Personal/job factors may seem to be beyond institutional control, whereas program satisfaction is something educators can improve. This *Digest* provides an updated look at research on retention in adult education and suggests effective practices for different settings.

Adult Basic Education

Repeatedly, attrition is described as the #1 problem in ABE. Attrition rates as high as 60-70% are reported in state and federal statistics (Quigley 1995). The raw numbers may be alarming, but they do not tell the whole story. Several studies show that noncompleters sometimes leave when they feel *their* goals were realized (Kambouri and Francis 1994; Perin and Greenberg 1994). The phenomenon of stopping out—one or more cycles of attending, withdrawing, and returning—is typical of adults who must place the student role on the back burner temporarily. Counting them as dropouts would be misleading.

Considering all leavers a homogeneous group is also misleading. Several studies confirm that noncompletion has complex causes and that noncompleters are better understood as subgroups. In Perin and Greenberg's (1994) workplace literacy study, completers were those who attended more than 21 hours, noncompleters came for 2 weeks, leavers attended less than 12 hours, and nonattenders were enrolled but never came. Leavers withdrew for different reasons than did noncompleters. Dirkx and Jha (1994) used two models: one categorizing learners as completers, continuers, and noncompleters, and the other refining the noncompleters into three subgroups—early and late noncontinuers and stopouts. A majority of noncontinuers were classified as "early" (leaving before 12 hours of instruction). The second model more accurately predicted noncompleters by considering them in separate groups.

A recurring theme in these and other studies is the crucial importance of the first few weeks, especially the first class. Quigley (1995) found that "reluctant learners" who drop out after the first few weeks were younger than persisters and were loners who felt they did not receive enough teacher attention. However, 73% reported they would go back under different conditions. Kambouri and Francis (1994) reported that most leavers stayed only 2-3 weeks, and Malicky and Norman (1994) also found the highest attrition rates occurred early in the program.

One cause of early withdrawal is a gap between learner expectations and reality. Adult learners may get frustrated early by lack of progress, or they are not given enough information before enrollment to know when to expect change and what they must do to achieve it (Hamann 1994). Noncompleters are motivated enough to enroll in educational programs and many clearly value education (Quigley 1995), but negative past experiences of school may be too strong, especially when they walk into classrooms or deal with instructors that remind them too clearly of those past experiences. This is especially true of learners who experienced culturally insensitive teachers or racism, who had been labeled failures, or whose family and community circumstances demonstrate that education does not necessarily improve mobility (D'Amico-Samuels 1990). Malicky and Norman (1994) also conclude that dropout is related to past school and home experiences but they stress that participation is multifaceted. Often, educational and practical concerns work together to affect the decision to stay or to leave (Perin and Greenberg 1994).

Tinto's model, most often applied to higher education, proposes that retention is related to how well students are socially and academically integrated into the institution. Social integration affects retention in ABE as well. Vann and Hinton (1994) found that 84% of completers of a worksite GED program belonged to class cliques, whereas 70% of dropouts were socially isolated. At work, dropouts networked with other workers of similar educational levels, and it is possible that additional education might disrupt those relationships. Completers networked with workers of higher educational levels, whose influence might contribute to their motivation to achieve.

Adults in Higher Education

Adults now make up at least 50% of higher education enrollments (MacKinnon-Slaney 1994), and their participation is the focus of a great deal of attention. Tinto's model is being examined and refined to determine whether it applies to nontraditional students, whose participation is complicated by competing external factors—jobs, family responsibilities, financial problems. As in ABE, adults in higher education cannot be considered a homogeneous group. The linear life course—education, work, retirement—is increasingly rare as people change jobs, retrain voluntarily or involuntarily, and reenter the work force at various times. Perhaps attrition has increased because more learners are now at widely varying stages of the life cycle compared to the traditional 18- to 22-year-old cohort. Among those elaborating on Tinto's model, MacKinnon-Slaney (1994) developed the Adult Persistence in Learning Model. This model combines personal issues (values, goals, interpersonal competence, mastery of life transitions), academic issues (ability, learning style, study skills), and social/environmental issues (environmental compatibility), based on the assumption that adult participation is a complicated response to a series of issues. The model provides a checklist for counseling, development of comprehensive services, and staff development to deal with retention.

Adults do not live on campus, they participate more in community than campus life, and they have stronger ties to career culture than to academic culture. However, in studying 25 adult managers or prospective managers in business classes, Ashar and Skenes (1993) found that social integration had a significant positive effect on retention, when the unit of analysis was the class and not the institution. Small groups of peers at the same level of career maturity created a social environment that motivated adult learners to persist. Learning needs alone appeared strong enough to attract adults to the program but not to retain them.

The female graduate students in Hagedorn's (1993) study benefitted from contact with students and faculty and wanted to

participate in institutional activities. However, family issues were a significant obstacle. Being married increased the probability of leaving by 83% and being single was most predictive of persistence. On the other hand, the highly individual mix of factors affecting retention is demonstrated by the completely opposite findings of Hanniford and Sagaria (1994). Among associate and bachelor's degree completers, marriage had only a limited effect on withdrawal, and those who had a child during enrollment were more likely to complete. Employment, however, had a substantial negative effect. They concluded that life circumstances "may interfere less with persistence than with the initial decision to return" (p. 21). For adults, social integration may be better defined as how one integrates pursuit of education into one's overall life.

As in ABE, "in some instances, noncompletion is the most successful outcome" (Cullen 1994, p. iii). Some of the nontraditional students taking an introductory course at the University of Edinburgh left because life changes made going to school no longer a goal, they found out they were not suited to academic life, or they realized the financial burden would be too great. Rather than considering external factors as beyond institutional control, Cullen proposes investigating whether adequate support might have helped. She also found that the reason given at the time of leaving is often the "last straw" or the least threatening to reveal; such reasons may skew retention research. The right support cannot be given if the underlying reasons are not revealed.

Cullen's subjects felt that being listened to and having their problems acknowledged was important. Vanderpool and Brown (1994) and Towles et al. (1993) also found that personal contact improved retention. In Vanderpool and Brown's study, a peer telephone network supported adult commuter students through phone calls within the first 2 weeks of the term. Students who were called were retained at a higher level than controls; they felt the practice put a human face on the university and gave them a sense of community. Of distance learners who were called by faculty in Towles et al.'s study, 55% completed the course; 64% of those not called did not complete. Towles et al. recommended giving the end-of-course evaluation to noncompleters in order to get more comprehensive assessment data.

Practices to Help Adult Learners Persist

Adult learners in both ABE and higher education have certain similarities: both groups must cope with multiple roles and responsibilities while tackling education; both may have had negative past experiences of school or lack confidence in their ability to return to study; both may face financial difficulties, employment and child care conflicts, or opposition to their continuing education from significant others. Cullen (1994) states that "the pressures of juggling the roles of student, partner, [parent], worker would be lessened if the role of student was seen as including the others" (p. 8). For both groups, early detection of those at risk of withdrawing and follow-up of those who have withdrawn are effective practices. Strategies for each group are described next.

Adult Basic Education

- Comprehensive strategies targeted for specific subpopulations (D'Amico-Samuels 1990)
- Curriculum based on learner culture; material that is challenging for *adults* (D'Amico-Samuels 1990; Quigley 1995)
- Opportunities to succeed at something in every class meeting, including the first, no matter how small or simple (Tracy-Mumford et al. 1994)
- Alternative arenas for success that enable learners to display competence in other areas (e.g., meals prepared by learners; volunteer tutors in English as a second language classes taught Spanish by adult learners) (Hamann 1994)

Higher Education

- Preenrollment counseling to establish expectations, give a sense of the university community (Cullen 1994)
- Personal attention; staff willing to listen; assistance with personal and financial problems (Smith and Bailey 1993)
- Managing the culture of the institution; recognizing adult anxiety about school (Smith and Bailey 1993)
- Flexible, convenient scheduling and frequent contact with faculty (including electronic methods) (Hagedorn 1993)

Tracy-Mumford et al.'s (1994) principles apply to both ABE and higher education: retention requires vision to guide efforts; programs control the conditions that foster retention; retention needs a student support system, high quality instruction, and flexible structures and processes to help motivate and sustain student commitment; and all program personnel affect persistence.

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